9-2010

Proximity to Power: How people keep governments honest

Knowledge@SMU

(http://knowledge.smu.edu.sg)

Proximity to Power: How people keep governments honest

Published: September 01, 2010 in Knowledge@SMU

More than nine million people reside in Thailand's capital city, making up a mere 14% of the country's 66.4 million people. Bangkok urbanites are, as such, a statistical minority. However, when provoked, this small segment of the population can be, and has been, a force to be reckoned with. Former Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra's fall from grace lends evidence to this claim.

Up till 2005, the man had seemed almost incorruptible. He had done well at the polls, revived the Thai economy and introduced universal healthcare. However, several political missteps followed. He was accused of buying out rival political parties. He had brought a defamation lawsuit against a local newspaper over a negative commentary – offending citizens who saw it as an attack on press freedom. Then there was the THB 73 billion tax-free sale of ShinCorp, a national telecommunications company owned by Thaksin's family.

In 2006, angry Bangkok residents took to the streets, demanding for Thaksin's resignation. A military-led coup followed, which toppled the government, leaving Thaksin on a self-imposed exile. This, of course, angered the larger populace from outside of the capital – people who supported Thaksin at the polls. Just earlier that year, Thaksin's Thai Rak Thai party had won 460 out of 500 seats in the lower house – perhaps indicative of his far-reaching popularity.

So how did a minor segment of the population overthrow a government that had the majority's backing? The answer may lie in a study conducted by SMU assistant professor of economics Do Quoc-Anh (http://www.economics.smu.edu.sg/faculty/economics/quocanhdo.asp), and Harvard University assistant professor of public policy Filipe Campante. Titled '*Keeping Dictators Honest: the Role of Population Concentration*', the researchers found links between governance and population concentrations in capital cities.

Revolutions begin with inequality

Do and Campante's study focused mainly on non-democratic countries. Their theory was that where inequality is high, non-democratic countries would face a greater threat of revolution, due to a lack of channels by which people may voice their needs, discontent or dissent. In contrast, fair elections in democratic countries should rightfully serve to honour and mediate between these sorts of sentiments. Revolutions would thus be unnecessary.

"Since dissent voices are hardly heard through democratic channels in an autocracy, where the poor are numerous and concentrated around the political centre of the country, they incubate a greater threat of insurgency attempt, as the expected gains from a revolution quickly outweigh the possible loss," they rationalised.

To test their theory, the researchers developed a 'Centred Index of Spatial Concentration' to measure population concentration around capital cities over a span of ten years, from 1990-2000. They then proceeded to see how the data corresponded with inequality, and the six World Bank-developed governance indicators: (1) Control of corruption; (2) Voice and accountability; (3) Rule of law; (4) Government effectiveness; (5) Quality of regulations; and (6) Political stability.

Five out of six of the governance indicators shared a significant positive relationship with population concentration; the exception being 'political stability'. This anomaly was, at first, a surprise to the researchers, as all of the indicators were seen to be complementary to each other. "The thinking is that when we have a greater population concentration, it creates more pressure. But then the government would respond to the pressure in its own way, so the effect on 'political stability' would be ambiguous," Do said.

However, controlling for the government's response, the researchers found a similar positive link – the greater the population concentration, the greater the political instability. The links across all governance indicators suggest that high population concentration around the capital city leads to better governance. Do and Campante cited an example: Saudi Arabia and Kuwait – both Middle Eastern countries that share similar autocratic forms of government, possess enormous natural resources, and practice similar religions – Kuwait, however, has a much more concentrated capital city, and thus scored "substantially" better on governance. The rationale is that the capital city's population played its part in scrutinising the government: The greater the population concentration, the greater the threat of a revolution, and with that, a looming pressure to "perform".

Tyranny of the minority

History may well support Do and Campante's arguments. Examples are aplenty in 18th to 19th century France. The flashpoint of the 1789 French Revolution, for instance, was the storming of the Bastille – a symbol of repression and authority – at the capital. This led to the death of King Louis XVI and the birth of the democratic republic.

Revolutions of considerable sizes have taken place elsewhere in the country without similar levels of success, perhaps largely due to their geopolitical distance from Paris. The researchers point to the 1831 and 1834 revolutions of silk workers in Lyon, France's second largest city. Spirited as they were – and the insurgents did capture the entire city on both occasions – the revolutions failed to produce "comparable repercussions at the national level".

"A relatively small mob in the capital city thence has as much political influence as a huge group of rebels elsewhere," they wrote. "The population concentrated around the capital city matters much more than elsewhere, when it comes to voicing discontent sentiments through non-democratic channels such as revolutions and riots, instead of democratic elections. With a larger, poorer pool of citizens comes a higher risk of turmoil."

Does this theory apply to the 2010 'Red Shirts' demonstrations that had set parts of Bangkok ablaze?

These protestors were supporters of Thaksin, who was ousted by the 'Yellow Shirts' in 2006. Their revolution of 2010 hence ran counter to the earlier revolution that had occurred just four years ago. Also unusual was that the 'Red Shirts' comprised mostly of Thais who were not from Bangkok. Thaksin, especially popular in the northern Thai provinces, had fervent supporters who saw fit to displace their livelihoods, travelling into the capital city for protests.

The 2010 revolution was not successful, in so far that the protests did not result in governmental change. A reason might be that most of the protestors were foreign to Bangkok, and hence, may not seem as big a threat to the powers that be. Even though transportation costs have lowered, compared to the times of the French Revolution, the geopolitical distance that exists between the 'Red Shirts' and the capital does not cease to be relevant.

"Realistically, they cannot just go to Bangkok to live for years without their incomes," said Do. "The population supporting the 'Red Shirts' may have been large, but the distance (has a limiting effect) on their ability to pressure." So technically, if the 2006 polls still reflect present-day sentiments, the minority of Thais who live in the capital still hold a greater influence over governance, compared to the majority who live outside of Bangkok.

Governmental influence aside, Do believes that politics in Bangkok are at a stalemate when people grow overly reliant on protests as tools to pressure for change. "If the situation had played out differently and the 'Red Shirts' had won their power, I believe there'd be another wave of counter-revolution," he said, adding that it may be more constructive to employ democratic institutions to mediate between people and their governments.

Constructive counter-revolutionary measures

Political oppression is perhaps the most convenient tool to counter threats of revolutions – a favourite among autocratic regimes where leaders may perceive little or no incentive to consider people's needs and wants. Nineteenth century France has proved, however, that repression is, at best, an interim measure to procrastinate on fundamental discords.

"Historical evidence shows that in many cases the ruling elite needs to appease insurgency threats by either extending democratic institutions for more voices and scrutiny from the mass, or redistributing economic rents and opportunities to the poor population, and usually both," the researchers wrote. So even where repression is widely accepted as a means of governance, leaders must consider, seriously, the population's welfare.

'Constructive counter-revolution methods' recognise that threats of insurrection will continue to grow as long as inequality persists and nothing is done to divert interests from subversive ideologies. If there are institutions where people may voice their concerns, seek rights and redistribution, there would be little impetus to protest. But if people have nowhere to go, inequality will persist to the point of revolution – where the cost of doing nothing exceeds that of going on strike.

Keeping the governments honest

Do and Campante proposed some practical measures that might "keep the government honest". For one, the government could extend the franchise and yield rights and privileges to people. They could also, via economic policies, education and healthcare, redistribute to the poor. Institutions could be set up to help look into voice, accountability and control of corruption. Finally, sufficient economic opportunities would keep the workforce occupied and systematically engaged. These measures, in various forms and combinations, should alleviate those feelings of helplessness, anger and despair that might consequently lead to insurrections.

"Intuitively, the government should adjust its counter-revolution measures so that the marginal effectiveness of insurrection prevention equates the marginal cost. A larger, poorer mass that is more concentrated round the capital city clearly presents a higher threat of insurgency, because individual costs are reduced more than individual expected gains, and that there is a larger pool of rebels to draw from," they explained.

Alternatively, the government could relocate its capital away from the city; away from densely populated areas. Myanmar did just that in 2005, when the political capital shifted from Yangon (population: 4.3 million) to Naypyidaw (population: 0.9 million). It was a move described by a journalist as "the ultimate insurance against regime change, a masterpiece of urban planning designed to defeat any putative 'colour revolution' – not by tanks and water cannons, but by geometry and cartography".

Do and Campante's study predicts deteriorating economic and political environments for countries like Myanmar, where governments distance themselves from people - literally. However, they also found that infrastructural improvements and domestic migration to capital cities in non-democratic regimes have mediating effects on inequality. So if Myanmar makes its capital city more accessible to people, the government may then have access to information that would help them placate displeasures constructively.

Another factor that Do recognises is the role of culture in driving change. Democracy, and those institutions founded on democratic principles, might still be perceived as a Western concept – hauling along with it historical and cultural 'baggage' that Asian rulers might see as being conflicting to traditional Eastern values. This, Do said, requires greater examination on culture and economics – a multidisciplinary area that is of growing interest amongst economics scholars.

back to top (#top)

back to top (#top)